

Excerpt from:



## Chapter 1: You're an Influencer

*I wanted the influence. In the end I wasn't very good at being a [university] president. I looked out of the window and thought that the man cutting the lawn actually seemed to have more control over what he was doing.*

—Warren Bennis

To get a glimpse of what it takes to exert profound influence, to literally change anything, we first travel to San Francisco and look in on influence master Dr. Mimi Silbert. Consider what Silbert has been able to do by applying the best of today's influence strategies to one of today's most noxious problems. She is the founder of the Delancey Street Foundation, a one-of-a-kind organization with headquarters at an upscale address on San Francisco's Embarcadero. Silbert's company is part corporate conglomerate and part residential therapy. It consists of several dozen businesses, all headed by Silbert.

What's unique about the institution is the employee population. In Silbert's words, "They're nasty, racist, violent, and greedy. They're thieves, prostitutes, robbers, and murderers." Then she adds: "When we started 30 years ago, most were gang members. Today many are third generation gang members." According to Silbert, "These guys get letters from Grandma saying, 'Get back here—the gang needs you!'"

Dr. Silbert's typical new hires have had four felony convictions. They've been homeless for years, and most are lifetime drug addicts. Within hours of joining Delancey, they are working in a restaurant, moving company, car repair

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shop, or one of many Delancey companies. And other than Silbert herself, these felons and addicts make up the entire population at Delancey. No therapists. No professional staff. No donations, no grants, no guards—just a remarkable influence strategy that has profoundly changed the lives of 14,000 employees over the past 30 years. Of those who join Delancey, over 90 percent never go back to drugs or crime. Instead they earn degrees, become professionals, and change their lives. Forever.

## **Meet James**

One of the employees we met is a well-scrubbed, affable but steely-eyed fellow we'll call James. James's story is typical of Silbert's staff. Like many of the 500 residents living on the San Francisco campus, James was a career criminal and drug addict before coming to Delancey. And like most, he started young. After four years he as a regular runaway, criminal, and drug abuser, James turned 10. By that time Illinois was fed up with his shenanigans and had tracked down James's father—who abandoned him at age one. State justice authorities wished James good luck as they stood at the gate at the O'Hare airport while making sure he understood that he was no longer welcome in Chicago.

James flew to Oakland, California, where he took up residence with his father near the docks. The first lesson his dear old dad taught him was how to shoot heroin. The next 25 years consisted of an uninterrupted period of violent crime, drug abuse, and prison time. Six years ago he was convicted of yet another violent offense and sentenced to 18 years with no hope of parole for 16 years. That's when he asked to join Delancey rather than serve his full sentence.

James changed in ways that are hard to imagine. When we first visited Delancey, he was professionally dressed and had not used drugs or alcohol in two years. To learn how Dr. Silbert influences this kind of change, we touch base with her work throughout this book. She draws from the principals and practices of every one of the influence geniuses we've studied to date.

Combining principals learned in Tanzania, practices honed in Mexico City, and theories developed in Palo Alto helps us understand how Ralph Heath in Marietta, Georgia, was able to influence the behavior of 4,500 engineers and craftsmen to move a stalled product from design to production, resulting in billions dollars in needed sales; why Mike Miller was able to change the culture of a massive IT group in order to dramatically improve performance; and what makes it possible for an individual who has struggled to lose weight for years to finally turn the corner. But most importantly, these proven concepts, principles, and theories will help you, your family, your company, and your community develop an influence repertoire of enormous power.

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## Chapter 2: Find Vital Behaviors

*It is not enough to do your best; you must know what to do, and THEN do your best.*

—W. Edwards Deming

### Search for Vital Behaviors

Perhaps the most important discovery from Wiwat's work is the notion that in addition to focusing on behavior, you should give special attention to a handful of *high-leverage* behaviors. Principal number two: Discover a few *vital* behaviors, change those, and problems—no matter the size—topple like a house of cards.

For example, relationship scholar Howard Markman took us into his Relationship Lab to show us how he learned that by focusing on only a few behaviors, he could predict with startling accuracy whether a given married couple is headed for divorce. More importantly, he found that if he could help couples practice a few similarly critical behaviors; he could reduce their chances of divorce or unhappiness by over one-third. You don't have to study what interests the couple share in common or how they were raised or any of the thousand different ways they treat each other. Merely watch how they argue. If Markman and his colleagues can watch a couple for just 15 minutes, they can predict with 90 percent accuracy who will and who won't be together and happy five years later! During those 15 minutes, Markman will invite a couple to discuss some topic about which they disagree. If the argument involves a significant amount of blaming, escalation, invalidation, or withdrawal, the future is bleak. If, on the other hand, the same couple opens tough conversations with statements that communicate respect and shared purpose, and halts emotional escalation in a respectful way to take a time out, the future will be entirely different.

To see exactly how only a few behaviors can play an enormous role in both causing and solving profound problems, let's look in on Dr. Mimi Silbert, the influence wizard who heads up Delancey. She learned early on that if you're going to work with subjects who lack just about every skill imaginable, you have to limit your scope of influence by identifying only a couple of vital behaviors and then work on them. Otherwise you dilute your efforts and eventually fail.

As you chat with Dr. Silbert, she's quick to point out that if you want to change ex-cons' lives, you need to focus on behavior, not values, homilies, or emotional appeals. Just imagine Mimi Silbert giving a value-laden lesson to James on his first day at Delancey. James vividly describes what she'd be up against.

Excerpt from:

“When residents wake up in their dorm the first morning and you say ‘Good morning’ to them, they assault you with profanity in return.” A pep talk on courtesy just isn’t going to cut it in this venue.

So Dr. Silbert focuses on changing behaviors, not on preaching homilies. And, once again, a few behaviors, not dozens. During one interview, Silbert explained with a wry smile: “You can’t succeed by trying to change 20 things at the same time!” So Silbert made a study of the behavior that needed changing, hoping to find a few that would provide focus and leverage in transforming criminals into citizens. After working with over 14,000 hardened criminals, Silbert is now convinced that just a couple of behaviors open the floodgates of change. If you focus on these two, a whole host of behaviors, values, attitudes, and outcomes follow. Silbert explains how it works.

“The hardest thing we do here is try to get rid of the code of the street. It says: ‘Care only about yourself, and don’t rat on anyone.’ However,” Silbert continues, “If you reverse those two behaviors, you can change everything else.”

James elaborates: “Helping residents learn to confront problems is essential. We’ve got Cripes, Bloods, white supremacists boarding with us, and they’re all bunking together. As you might imagine, the tension runs high. Everything we try to change in here is about getting rid of the gang culture. So we *talk* a lot.”

With this in mind, Silbert targets two high-leverage behaviors that help residents talk in ways that eventually destroy the gang culture. First, she requires each person to take responsibility for someone else’s success. Second, she demands that everyone confront everyone else about every single violation.

To transform these ideals into realities, each resident is placed in charge of someone else the very first week. For instance, say you’re a resident who was homeless and strung out on crack a week ago. During the seven days since coming to Delancey, someone who had only been a resident for a little longer than you would take you under his or her wing and teach you to set a table in the restaurant. A week later when someone even newer comes in, you’re in charge of teaching that person to set the table. From that moment forward, people no longer talk to you about how *you’re* doing. They ask you how your *crew* is doing.

Next, residents learn the second vital behavior: to speak up to people who are breaking the rules, drifting off, becoming verbally aggressive, and otherwise behaving badly. For most ex-criminals, talking about these types of problems is like speaking a foreign language. Ultimately, Silbert helps residents change their values and attitudes—even their hearts—but she does so by focusing in two vital behaviors.